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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
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INFO CIS COLLECTIVE
AMEMBASSY ANKARA
USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA
USCINCCENT MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001049

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SUBJECT: BERDIEV SACKED; MEREDOV NEW FOREIGN MINISTER

(U) CLASSIFIED BY CDA ERIC T. SCHULTZ, REASONS 1.5 (B)
AND (D)

¶1. (C) PRESIDENT NIYAZOV OPENED THE SEVENTH SESSION OF THE MEJLIS (PARLIAMENT) JULY 7 WITH A SPEECH IN WHICH HE HARSHLY CRITICIZED AND THEN DISMISSED FOREIGN MINISTER BATYR BERDIEV. NIYAZOV ACCUSED BERDIEV OF EXCESSIVE DRINKING, AND SAID THAT AS A RESULT OF BERDIEV'S PERSONAL FAILINGS HE HAD BEEN INEFFECTIVE IN MANAGING EITHER THE FOREIGN MINISTRY OR THE COUNTRY'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS. IN PARTICULAR HE CITED CORRUPTION IN THE MINISTRY'S CONSULAR SECTION'S VISA ISSUANCE AND THE MINISTRY'S FAILURE TO MAKE PROGRESS ON RESOLVING THE DISPUTE WITH AZERBAIJAN OVER CASPIAN DEMARCATION. HE ALSO CRITICIZED BERDIEV FOR PROMOTING PEOPLE FROM HIS OWN REGION AND FAILING TO IDENTIFY AND PROMOTE A GOOD FIRST DEPUTY MINISTER. NIYAZOV PROMISED BERDIEV AN ONWARD ASSIGNMENT BUT GAVE NO INDICATION WHAT IT WOULD BE.

¶2. (C) NIYAZOV APPOINTED THE CHAIRMAN OF THE MEJLIS, RASHID MEREDOV TO BE THE NEW FOREIGN MINISTER AND NAMED THE GOVERNOR OF BALKANABAT PROVINCE (TURKMENBASHI) REJEPBAY ARAZOV AS MEREDOV'S REPLACEMENT. MEREDOV HAD ONLY BEEN SPEAKER, NOMINALLY THE NUMBER TWO POSITION IN THE GOVERNMENT, SINCE APRIL. ARAZOV HAD BEEN GOVERNOR OF BALKANABAT SINCE LAST JANUARY, WHEN HE WAS TRANSFERRED FROM OIL AND GAS MINISTER. IN THE NEUTRAL TURKMENISTAN REPORT OF THE SPEECH, NIYAZOV IS QUOTED AS TELLING MEREDOV THAT KNB CHAIRMAN MUHAMMET NAZAROV WILL OVERSEE HIS WORK. NAZAROV THUS (OFFICIALLY) ADDS FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO HIS EVER-GROWING LIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES.

¶3. (C) CHARGE SPOKE AT LENGTH JULY 5 WITH TWO FORMER FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS WHO ARE HEADED TO THE U.S. ON MUSKIE FELLOWSHIPS, NIKOLAI NAZAROV AND AZAT ATANJANOV. THEY FORESHADOWED BERDIEV'S DEPARTURE, NOTING THAT WHILE HE HAD BEEN A VERY GOOD AMBASSADOR IN VIENNA AT THE OSCE, HE HAD PROVEN A POOR MANAGER AND HAD BEEN UNABLE TO ESTABLISH HIS AUTHORITY OVER THE MINISTRY. HE HAD BEEN UNABLE TO ACQUIRE EITHER THE RESOURCES OR THE ACCESS TO THE PRESIDENT THAT WOULD HAVE BUTTRESSED HIS AUTHORITY. THEY BOTH ALSO FORESHADOWED NAZAROV'S NEW ROLE, NOTING NIYAZOV'S PATTERN OF LOADING DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES ON A TRUSTED DEPUTY. SHIKHMURADOV HAD FILLED THAT ROLE THROUGHOUT MUCH OF THE DECADE. WITH HIS FALL FROM POWER, THE FOREIGN MINISTRY HAD ALSO LOST INFLUENCE.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: BERDIEV WAS PRESENT ALONG WITH NAZAROV AND MEREDOV AT THE EMBASSY'S JULY 4 RECEPTION. HE GAVE US NO INDICATION THAT HIS DISMISSAL WAS IMMINENT. HOWEVER, MOST OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS HAS FELT FOR SOME TIME THAT HE WAS ON THIN ICE. IN PART, THIS WAS BECAUSE BERDIEV WAS SEEN AS FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER SHIKHMURADOV'S MAN. IN PART, IT WAS BECAUSE BERDIEV WAS TOO YOUNG, TOO INEXPERIENCED, AND TOO WEAK TO SURVIVE IN TURKMEN POLITICS. NONETHELESS, THE PREVAILING SENTIMENT IS THAT BERDIEV'S DISMISSAL, AND ESPECIALLY THE PERSONAL ATTACK ON HIS CHARACTER, WAS UNJUST.

¶5. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: THE CHOICE OF MEREDOV IS A SURPRISE, BUT NOT NECESSARILY AN UNPLEASANT ONE FOR US. HE IS A 41-YEAR-OLD LAWYER WITH SOME ENGLISH, WHO SEEMS WESTERN-ORIENTED. HOWEVER THE MOST INTERESTING BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE IS THAT HIS FATHER, OVEZGELDIY, IS ONE

OF THE EMBASSY'S LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS, A FACT WHICH CANNOT HAVE BEEN UNKNOWN TO NIYAZOV. MEREDOV'S APPOINTMENT, TAKEN TOGETHER WITH NAZAROV'S RARE PRESENCE AT THE JULY 4 RECEPTION (HE ALMOST NEVER ATTENDS NATIONAL DAYS AND DID NOT ATTEND EITHER THE RUSSIAN SOVEREIGNTY DAY JUNE 12, OR THE QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY JUNE 16), AND THE RECENT EXIM PAYMENT OF USD 50 MILLION, COULD BE SEEN AS THE BEGINNING OF A TURKMEN EFFORT TO REENGAGE WITH THE U.S., AS AMBASSADOR MANN URGED THE GOTX TO DO IN HIS FAREWELL CALLS.

SCHULTZ